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SUBJECT: EU ACCESSION NEGOTIATION TIMELINES: THE
HISTORICAL RECORD

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) The EU is now preparing for its sixth wave of enlargement with the expected accession of Bulgaria and Romania on 1 January 2007. Croatia and Turkey, and perhaps Macedonia and other Balkan states, are waiting in the queue. The only consistent lesson that can be drawn from looking at the historical record is that the EU has traditionally preferred to handle candidates in groups (Greece's accession in January 1981 was the exception). There is considerable variation in how quickly accession negotiations start after agreement to open them, or how long it then takes for the candidate countries to actually join the EU. END SUMMARY.

FROM APPROVAL TO OPENING OF NEGOTIATIONS

2. (U) In previous accessions, the amount of time it has taken the EU (or its predecessor the EEC) to move from a formal decision to begin negotiations to the actual commencement of those negotiations has varied. For the newest EU members from Central Europe, the time lag was either 2 or 3 months. But the time has ranged anywhere from just one month (in the case of Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1993) to six months (with Denmark, Ireland and the UK in 1970). The latter number, however, is in the process of being extended as Croatia, which received a formal decision to begin negotiations in June 2004, will have to wait at least nine months to March 2005, or perhaps even more than a year, for its negotiations to begin. (A table listing all dates for previous enlargements can be found at www.state.sgov.gov/p/useubrussels).

FROM BEGINNING NEGOTIATIONS TO ENTRY INTO THE EU

3. (U) The variation among time lags for starting negotiations, however, has no correlation to how long it has taken candidates to join the EU. Again, Austria, Sweden and Finland represent the fastest end of the range, with their entry to the EU coming just twenty four months after beginning negotiations. But the next fastest group was the trio with the longest lead time prior to opening of negotiations -- Denmark, Ireland and the UK -- who entered the EU just 37 months from the date of beginning talks. At the other end of the range are Spain, which waited just two months to begin negotiations, but then spent 83 months, or just under seven years, before joining the EU; and Portugal, whose accession treaty negotiations and ratification took over seven years (87 months) to complete.

WHY THE VARIANCE?

4. (U) It is no coincidence that the speediest accession process involved Austria, Finland and Sweden. EU accession is essentially about how quickly new Member States can commit to applying the EU's body of laws and regulations (the "acquis communautaire") and how quickly the EU is willing to include the new Members in all of the EU's budgetary programs, including agricultural, regional and cohesion funds. Therefore, accession negotiations for small, open, and thoroughly regulated rich economies that will become net contributors to the EU budget (read: Austria, Sweden and Finland, or, in the future, Iceland or Norway) can negotiate entry quickly. These countries were helped by the fact that their membership in the European Free Trade Area (EFTA) meant much of their legislation had already been adapted to EU legislation. Bigger or poorer economies with far greater tasks ahead to align their legislation, such as Spain or Portugal, took longer to agree the various "transition periods" required for full application of the acquis.

5. (U) Finally, the timetable for accession negotiations is heavily influenced by political will within the EU. Six of the ten new entrants of 2004 began their negotiations in 1998, while the other four only got underway in 2000. And yet they all entered on the same date. This was because the EU-15 decided it would be much easier to bring them in together and adjust EU budgets, Commission assignments, voting weights in the Council, or seats in the European

Parliament for the group as a whole rather than individually.

But this logic only goes so far. Bulgaria and Romania, despite beginning negotiations just as quickly as Malta or Lithuania in 2000, faced much larger administrative, financial and economic hurdles than their classmates (not least their impact on the EU budget), and will spend some two and a half to three years longer securing their eventual entry into the Union.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) Only wealthy countries can expect to negotiate entry into the EU at all quickly. And even some relatively rich countries (Cyprus, Malta) that would not demand much from the EU budget have seen accession take many years when their domestic structures and politics were complicated enough. The real lesson from the historical record of EU accession is that, in all 22 cases where the EU began accession negotiations (including Norway, which later decided not to join the EU), the EU has NEVER failed to finish them successfully.

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